

# The War of Ideas: The Unheard Voice

By Roy Schmadeka

**Editorial Abstract:** *The author contends the current US information strategy is flawed at the conceptual level. Whereas promotion of the US values continues to be an important foreign policy cornerstone, it adequately addresses neither the current terrorist threat nor the strategic communication objective of diminishing support for violent extremists. He offers realistic, complementary programs as a new strategy to decrease support for violent extremism.*

*[Editor's note: Written in early 2008, this article explores the importance of applied Information Operations as a critical aspect of Defense Support to Public Diplomacy. Notably, Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy, James Glassman—the US Government lead in the War of Ideas—echoed the same themes six months later, in June 2008.]*

Many have proclaimed the “War of Ideas” to be of paramount importance in America’s prosecution of the War on Terror. This general concept has been further developed to state “the center of gravity for war and terror are the populations that can provide sanctuaries, safe havens and/or recruitment for terrorists.” In this war, the object has been to influence targeted populations to accept the US “idea” over that of extremism. To this end, great efforts are being made on many fronts to promote (or salvage) the US image in the Muslim world, with the goal of reversing anti-American sentiment and garnering widespread Muslim support. Proponents of this Public Diplomacy strategy contend these actions will counteract anti-US propaganda, thereby severely hampering popular support for extremism.

This strategy, while appearing to be theoretically sound, is flawed at the conceptual level. Whereas bolstering the US image is a necessary and worthwhile endeavor, it should not—indeed, cannot—be the primary strategy to erode popular support for extremism. This War of Ideas is not a battle to win support for America. This is not “freedom and democracy” on one side, and “Islamofascism” on the other. Neither is this a “choose

America or choose Al Qaeda” scenario. It must be dispassionately viewed as a battle to defeat religious extremism, with the primary objective of wholesale, popular rejection of violent totalitarian



*Enabling the ‘Mainstream Voice.’  
(Defense Link)*

ideology—the Wahhabist view of Islam currently promulgated by Al Qaeda. Viewed in this fashion, this war should be fought not by making the US “idea” (i.e. freedom, democracy, opportunity) look more attractive, but by concentrating efforts on diminishing the widespread appeal and acceptance of extremism.

The US can attain this objective, but only by shifting its informational focus toward Muslim audiences from promoting America and its values, to that of invalidating violent Wahhabist ideology. The most effective counter to Islamic extremism is found

within Islam itself: the *Mainstream Voice*, composed of Muslims—both Sunni and Shiite—whose moderate ideology is so at odds with that of violent Wahhabism. The US can assist and enable the Mainstream Voice, expand its reach globally, and magnify its effectiveness. Only in this fashion can the US erode acceptance of the hate-filled extremist rhetoric ubiquitous in the global media.

## Not the Cold War

The strategy of promoting American freedom and democracy during the Cold War, as a direct counter to Soviet-led Communism, was a hugely successful endeavor. Cold War historian and author John Lewis Gaddis writes, “Promoting democracy became the most visible way that the Americans and their Western European allies could differentiate themselves from their Marxist-Leninist rivals.” America is no longer fighting the Cold War. The enemy is not Communism, but religious extremism. The enemy is neither a superpower nor even a nation-state. Given these dichotomies between the Cold War and the current War of Ideas, it should be obvious that a different strategy is necessary.

## The Problem

The greatest challenges to the current Public Diplomacy strategy are twofold:

1. **The High Ground.** During the Cold War, a large portion of the world saw America as “the good guy.” More recently, this image has suffered a major setback—a development that has vastly diminished the credibility

*The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque [Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim.*

*-Usama Bin Laden, World Islamic Front, February 23, 1998*

of its messages... and messengers. Susceptibility to US influence efforts, especially within Muslim audiences, is at a very low ebb. A 2007 Pew Global Attitudes Survey showed “the overall US image remains abysmal in predominantly Muslim countries.” Information released by the US is viewed as self-serving manipulation, and those government or organizational entities that cooperate with them are seen as “American puppets” or “Zionist collaborators” within much of the Muslim world. This view existed well prior to the 9/11 attacks, but has been intensified by the invasion of Iraq and other “atrocities” against Muslims that Al Qaeda so effectively uses to further their cry against “Muslim victimization.” As will be seen later in this article, this view is not a randomly developed phenomenon.

**2. Weaponized Media.** Al Qaeda is well versed at using and manipulating the media to serve their purposes, whereas America generally performs at a level that can only be viewed as well below average. For example, the recent Al Qaeda invitation for international journalists to pose interview questions to Ayman al-Zawahiri is seen as an AQ strategy to reach a broader audience, and represents al-Zawahiri’s attempt to present himself as a sophisticated leader rather than a mass murderer. This singular act may well elevate al-Zawahiri, in the minds of many, to the same level of political viability as any leader on the world stage. Added to their rapid-reacting, far-ranging and complementary use of mass media (especially the Internet) to promulgate

extremist messages, this veneer of political respectability may dramatically increase the effects of AQ propaganda efforts. Terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman, formerly of RAND Corporation and currently a graduate instructor at Georgetown University, states “... their media capability is as sophisticated as ever. It shows how this group with 7th century ideology is exploiting 21st century media capabilities.” Compare this to the well-intentioned but stumbling efforts of the US, who cannot even agree upon a lasting definition, much less a workable solution, for a national-level strategic communication policy.

### Us or Them

President Bush, in a 2001 news conference, stated “You’re either with us or against us in the fight against terror.” Although this comment was directed to actual and potential national allies, many among the general Muslim populace have taken this to mean, “if you are not with America, then you are with America’s enemies”—in this case, Al Qaeda. Extremists, never slow to attack a potential opening, have fostered this sentiment among regions with historical or growing anti-American views. South and Southeast Asia, in particular, are home to strong feelings of anti-Americanism. P. W. Singer of the Brookings Institution summarizes the 2006 Pew Forum study that went to nine countries and surveyed Muslim

youth attitudes, drawing from more than 2,000 interviews:

*Whether it was in Turkey or Indonesia, the study found a consensus about how youth in the Muslim world—our key target audience in this war of ideas—think America regards them and their faith. As one student researcher described of the interview results, “They think Americans just don’t care and think all Muslims are evil or terrorists. They say, ‘We get your media and see how you view Islam.’” Added another, “Wherever the group traveled, Fox News was on, and you’d see Ann Coulter calling people ‘ragheads’ over and over; or Glenn Beck on CNN.”*

Add to this unfavorable opinions about US policies with regards to Palestine, Iraq, Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, and it’s no mystery why so many in the Muslim world view America in a negative light... they believe America has actually declared war upon Islam. President Bush’s unfortunate use of the term “crusade” early on fostered this belief enormously.

### The Enemy

The quote from UBL (above left) unequivocally states Al Qaeda’s position, and has been taken up as a clarion-call by extremists worldwide. Many extremists also draw their guidance from a treatise titled *The Management of Savagery*—authored by Abu Bakr Naji, a well respected strategist—which gives



*Whose messages best reach the ears of the Muslim world?  
(US Air Force)*

explicit detail into how to destabilize “apostate” regimes (secular Muslim governments supported by the US) and take the fight directly to America. Further, this treatise offers two main goals with specific regards to fomenting anti-Americanism:

1) Destroy a large part of the respect for America and spread confidence in the souls of Muslims, through fighting America directly.

2) Replace the human casualties sustained... that will probably come for two reasons; 1) Being dazzled by the operations undertaken in opposition to America; and 2) Anger over the obvious, direct American interference in the Islamic World, such that the anger compounds the previous anger against America’s support for the Zionist entity.

A large portion of the extremist strategy hinges upon rampant anti-Americanism. By focusing solely upon bolstering the American image worldwide, the US is fighting this war the way Al Qaeda wishes.

### The Mainstream Voice

King Abdullah’s quote (above right) is representative of the view espoused by the vast majority of Muslims worldwide, be they Sunni or Shiite. The problem is this type of statement receives limited exposure in either Western or Muslim media, so gains minimal traction with either audience. Compare this to the daily media barrage whenever Bin Laden or al-Zawahiri so much as write a note or release a radio statement. King Abdullah’s quote also brings up a significant point: the vitriolic hatred directed against America has spawned its own backlash against Islam in general, by many Americans. Even those among the US political and military leadership have called Islam a “religion of evil” and stated “the enemy is Islam.” This American rhetoric airs in every corner of the Muslim world, with predictable results.

The mainstream voice also has neither “contagion” nor “Stickiness Factor,” two concepts Malcolm Gladwell introduced in his book *The Tipping*

*Our religion calls us to live and work for justice and to promote tolerance. Daily, we share God’s blessing: Salaam Aleikum—“Peace be upon you.” This is the true voice of Islam, but it is not the voice that Americans always hear. Instead, they hear the hatred spewed by groups mistakenly called Islamic fundamentalists. In fact, there is nothing fundamentally Islamic about these extremists. They are religious totalitarians, in a long line of extremists of various faiths who seek power by intimidation, violence and thuggery.*

*-His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan*

*Point:* “We tend to spend a lot of time thinking about how to make messages more contagious—how to reach as many people as possible with our products or ideas. But the hard part about communication is often how to make sure a message doesn’t go in one ear and out the other. Stickiness means that a message makes an impact.” This is the focus area we must address, as it represents the most effective means with which to defeat extremism... by garnering widespread support for mainstream Muslim views, and active rejection of extremist ideology. Winning support for the US is a tertiary goal in this endeavor. America has the capability to expand the reach of mainstream voices, and enable the “contagion” that Gladwell mentions. Further, if the US selects the correct voices (key communicators), and they are properly presented, “stickiness” is sure to follow.

### The Oblique Approach

The UNESCO quote (opposite page) captures the essence of this approach to the War of Ideas. We must influence worldwide audiences in the proper way, to promote peace and non-violence. What is needed in this War of Ideas is a method to remove the entrenched perception that Muslim populations must choose between religious extremism

(Al Qaeda) and the United States of America. Many recent studies and polls show support for the US has appreciably waned within the Muslim world. By equating “rejection of extremism” with “love for America,” the US is fighting an uphill battle.

Wahhabist extremism is very much a minority faction within Islam—the vast majority, whether secularists or fundamentalists, do not espouse violence to further political agendas. Imam Hamza Yusuf, perhaps the leading US-based Islamic scholar, summarizes the mainstream view: “We are living through a reformation, but without any theologians to guide us through it. Islam has been hijacked by a discourse of anger and a rhetoric of rage.” Thomas Friedman goes so far as to state “We’re not fighting to eradicate ‘terrorism.’ Terrorism is just a tool. We’re fighting to defeat an ideology: religious totalitarianism.” He further mentions that informational efforts—from within the Muslim community—must be the key focus, with schools and mosques at the forefront of any ‘battle.’ This then, should be the focus of US informational efforts, whether executed unilaterally or through Muslim partners: reject extremism and the use of violence to effect change because you do not agree with violent extremist totalitarianism.

J. Michael Waller, in his work *Fighting the War of Ideas Like A Real War*, promotes the concept of “branding” terrorism for the criminal and unacceptable violence it is. He states “The US should start with a message that its audiences are most likely to accept readily: the evil nature of the enemy.” Identifying and selecting material for this task is not difficult. The following definition of Wahhabism is representative of the mainstream view of this extremist ideology:

*Wahhabism is a fiercely fundamentalist form of orthodox Sunni Islam. After a brief examination of its tenets it is clear that it is one of division, domination and hate. This radically fundamentalist dogma is fanatically bigoted, xenophobic and lends itself to serve as the catalyst for*

*much of the Islamofascist aggression being perpetrated around the world. It is a wrathful doctrine that rejects the legitimacy of all religious philosophy but its own. Wahhabism condemns Christians, Jews and all other non-Muslims, as well as non-Wahhabi Muslims. Wahhabists believe it is a religious obligation for Muslims to hate Christians and Jews.*

Take this branding concept one step further. If the US were to enable and expand similar mainstream Muslim branding efforts, we could dramatically magnify the parallel effects. In fact, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called for this type of activity during a 2004 speech at the US Institute of Peace:

*We must also do everything that we can to support and encourage the voices of moderation and tolerance and pluralism within the Muslim world... lasting progress and reform in society must emerge from within. Today, outside support for extremists is common, while moderates too often struggle with inadequate resources and too little solidarity. That has to change—and we have to help change it.*

### Environmental Issues

Of the various aspects of executing this type of mainstream Muslim support, perhaps the most challenging is to determine how best to work with those Muslim elements that do not wish to be associated with America. Whereas some Islamic organizations would welcome direct US support, there are many—perhaps even the majority—who would consider association with America an anathema. As previously stated, sensitivities to this issue run quite high. Any indication that a Muslim organization is under American influence—a US ‘puppet’—means instant loss of credibility, with organizational death sure to follow.

The information environment is well primed for this type of activity, especially within Southeast Asia. Recent polls in Indonesia—the world’s most

populous Muslim nation—and Malaysia show that religious extremism is not welcome. Although there have been recent, high profile successes against terrorist activity in Indonesia, many recognize “the public at large has not yet been fully involved in this matter... there is a need for a campaign to encourage active involvement of the people in the prevention, overcoming and elimination of terrorism.” In addition, Indonesian views historically reflect “pluralism in religion and culture is a fact of public life, while for others it is often a matter of pride.” The overall Malaysian view indicates their Muslim community is driven more by the need to make a living, not the thought of jihad, and that any move toward violence would threaten the prosperity and comfort that people seek. Thus, Wahhabist extremism is at odds with the mainly Sufi Islam of these two republics. However, this has not precluded the growth of terrorist

***“Since wars begin in the minds of men,  
it is in the minds of men that the defenses  
of peace must be constructed.”  
- UNESCO Organizational  
Constitution***

elements within the region. These respective governments are addressing the terrorist threat as well as they are able, and are having some success. Enabling, expanding and coordinating official and non-governmental elements in this fight could provide dramatic effects.

### The Strategy

The US must implement a comprehensive information program—supported by actions whenever possible—targeting selected populations to attain the following overarching communication goal: *wholesale rejection of violent extremist ideology*. The key component of this program is audiences must perceive that views espoused come from within Islam. This perception will not be a fallacy... the main drivers behind selected messages will, for the most part, be well-known and respected Muslim

personalities. Other communicators must at least be well respected within Muslim communities, irrespective of their faith. The major supporting themes for this goal should be commonly accepted by all, and transcend cultural or national boundaries.

The mainstream voices we should most readily promote are listed below. In perusing these categories, remember that what should be promoted is neither acceptance/support of the US nor American values. Rather, the primary goal is, first and foremost, rejection of extremist ideology.

### **A. Highlight mainstream Muslim Key Communicators and their efforts against terrorism/extremism** (actions and ideology).

1. Islamic scholars/clerics/Imams who decry use of violence, openly reject Wahhabism and disavow Al Qaeda. This type of influence messaging carries extreme weight, as it originates from within Islam, and is presented as guidance from established and respected spiritual leaders. Many examples of this exist—the key is to capitalize upon messages that parallel US objectives.

a. Shaikh Muqbil bin Hadi al-Wadi’i, a famous salafi-mufti in Yemen, required the following obligations when authorizing jihad: 1) the Muslim capability of waging jihad does not cause conflict among Muslims themselves, and 2) Jihad is not applied by Muslims to gain any political position or to get personal interest in this world.

b. Yusef al-Qaradawi, a leading Muslim scholar, issued a fatwa immediately after the attacks (9/11), saying Usama Bin Laden “could not call himself a Muslim.”

2. Reformed terrorists that disavow Al Qaeda and terrorism. Expanding the reach and impact of repentant terrorists serves as a very strong anti-recruitment and anti-support tool. This type of messaging reaches the audience on an emotional level, as these former terrorists are usually well-respected fighters within their region of origin (and beyond), whom the audience often relates to and admires.



*The worldwide Muslim audience awaits. (Defense Link)*

a. Nasir Abas, a former leader in Jemaah Islamiyah, and Bali-bomber Ali Imron actively preach against terrorism in Indonesia, and try to “persuade former comrades to give up the idea of violence against the West in the name of Islam.”

b. Sayed al-Shareef (a.k.a. Doctor Fadl), one of the main ideologues of the Islamic Jihad movement, has “produced an elaborate recantation of his extremist views.”

3. Celebrity figures that resonate with Muslim audiences and who promote (or will promote) messages of peace and anti-violence. Reaching the audience again on an emotional level, this type of messaging offers perhaps the quickest measurable impact, due to immediate audience accessibility and susceptibility.

a. Sports figures: soccer players Cristiano Ronaldo and Zinedine Zidane are extremely well known throughout SE Asia [Zidane would be particularly relevant to an anti-violence campaign, due to his famous World Cup head butt and following repentance]. Manny Pacquiao, champion boxer, is well respected throughout the region, and is a national hero in his native Philippines.

b. Many television and movie personalities resonate well throughout SE Asia. Celebrities from Hollywood, Hong Kong, “Bollywood” and regional stars should all be considered for inclusion in any program. Oprah Winfrey is huge in Indonesia, and her show is described there as “one of the great programming

[sic] in the world. Watched by an [sic] million people in the world, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* is the undisputed leader of daytime television.”

c. Muslim pop culture is a vastly underutilized influence resource. Pop music personalities—Muslim and non-Muslim alike—have huge followings, especially amongst the younger generation, the primary audience in this ideological battle.

**B. Highlight historical and ongoing civic activities of both Muslim and Western charities/organizations that promote peace & prosperity as a primary goal.** This is most effective whenever the civic action is a cooperative effort between the US (USAID) and a Muslim entity (either a government agency or Muslim charity organization). All efforts should push the Muslim entity to the forefront, and relegate US involvement to that of a supporting agent. In this way we increase confidence in host nation capabilities, which is of primary importance in engendering an atmosphere of hope and prosperity within target audiences.

1. Officials and celebrities that promote awareness of Muslim civic actions throughout the world.

a. A prime example of this would be the actions of the Aga Khan Foundation (AGF). His Highness the Aga Khan, leader of 25 million Ismaili Shiite Muslims, has created a vast network of charitable works and humanitarian

aid. He is well known and respected worldwide. These and similar actions would instill, augment and/or bolster “Muslim pride”—in many cases, AGF requires no outside (especially Western) assistance. However, AGF does sporadically partner with other aid organizations, which may provide the perfect opportunity to highlight intercultural/interfaith cooperation.

2. Officials and celebrities that promote American goodwill and awareness of US civic actions throughout the Muslim world.

a. This public diplomacy activity complements the primary focus of terror rejection, and acts as strong support for US-led PD efforts... especially messages not of US origin. There is an entrenched perception among Muslim populations that the US does little for the Muslim world except steal their resources. Whereas “love for America” is not a primary goal of this program, any efforts to negate anti-Americanism should be viewed as an important parallel and complementary activity. For example, pro-American sentiment throughout SE Asia was extremely high immediately following the 2006 SE Asia tsunami disaster relief efforts. The US must maintain and capitalize upon this sort of effect.

**C. Highlight commonalities & interfaith dialogue.** This type of activity attacks extremism on an intellectual level, and attempts to remove the emotions of angst, hatred and victimization.

1. Activities and events that promote peace, opportunity and pluralism/tolerance.

a. Television events, especially serial programming, that promote pluralism and interfaith dialogue are of immense value. If presented properly, such shows can reach millions, engender meaningful dialogue and have a lasting impact on society. A good example of this concept is *The Doha Debates*, presented as public forum for dialogue and freedom of speech in Qatar. Chaired by internationally known broadcaster Tim Sebastian, formerly of the BBC’s *HARDTalk*, these programs provide a platform for serious discussion of the



hottest issues in the Arab and Islamic worlds, striving to be both controversial and informative. The show's reach could easily be expanded into SE Asia, or a new regional-specific program could be created using this model.

b. High-profile, international religious conferences draw in just the sort of key communicators necessary to influence the masses. However, these conferences often pass with little or no media fanfare, losing any potential gains for the cause of pluralism. For example, Shaykh Kabbani, Chairman of the Islamic Supreme Council of America, was one of the organizers of a four-day International Conference of Islamic Scholars held in late 2005. This forum featured world-renowned Muslim scholars including: Dr. Husain Haqqani of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Dr. Khaled M. Abou El Fadl of the University of California at Los Angeles School of Law; Dr. Abdul Ghani Le Joyeux of the Muslim World League of France; and Dr. Rahma Bourqia, President of the Universite Hassan II Mohammedia-Casablanca in Morocco. The conference provided a forum for Islamic leaders to discuss strategies, programs and plans to elucidate a modern vision for civil society institutions in Muslim societies. These types of activities, and there are many of them, need widest promotion throughout selected regions.

**D. Execute a comprehensive Anti-Violence Program (AVP) throughout Muslim regions.** This program should highlight universal themes that transcend cultural and national boundaries, and reach audiences via multiple media


platforms. Although managed and coordinated for effect by the US, all voices and messages promulgated by the program should adhere to the above-listed points. The most influential and resonant messages impacting Muslim audiences are not those originating from the US. In conjunction with the programs previously mentioned, AVP will capitalize upon the recommendations of Shaikh Abu Yahya Al-Libi—a senior member of Al Qaeda, and one of the foremost experts on the strengths and vulnerabilities of the contemporary extremist movement:

This approach helps strip the extremist movement of its monopoly on the dialogue, and instead unleash a “torrential flood of ideas and methodologies which find backing, empowerment, and publicity from numerous parties” against them.

### Conclusions

The US can quickly and effectively implement such a comprehensive program. Notably, this approach in no way replaces the current Public Diplomacy strategy, primarily led by the US Department of State. The dedicated professionals of the Diplomatic Corps consistently make great strides in promoting American values worldwide,

especially within the Asia-Pacific region. “Selling” democracy and American values has long been a cornerstone of foreign policy, and will continue to have strong effect in the coming years. To complement this overarching global strategy, and assist in ever-expanding strategic communication efforts, America must shift its Muslim-audience focus toward magnifying those Islamic views and values that most closely parallel US regional goals and objectives.

Many avenues exist to help the US and the Coalition work toward the aforementioned communication goal of wholesale rejection of violent extremist ideology. The US has taken the global lead in their proclaimed War on Terror, and will continue to prosecute this fight until they achieve victory. Now that we recognize the War of Ideas as the key component of the WOT—a battle that could easily be renamed “War of Ideology,” and one that must be won in order for extremism to be defeated—American policymakers must determine the exact parameters of this new “War.” It’s time to shed antiquated strategies, regardless of their former utility, and operationally focus all communication efforts in accordance with new paradigms. 

*“The fourth component to Abu Yahya’s proposed grand strategy is strengthening and backing Islamic movements far removed from Jihad, particularly those with a democratic approach. Beyond supporting them, he counsels governments to push these mainstream groups into ideological conflict with extremist groups in order to keep the extremist scholars and propagandists busy responding to their criticisms.”*